7-9-2001

Hoekstra, James Oral History Interview: Parents of Baby Boomer Generation

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Published in: 2001 - Parents of Baby Boomer Generation (some of whom participated in World War II military operations) (H88-0234) - Hope College Living Heritage Oral History Project, July 9, 2001. Copyright © 2001 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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GR: Jim, tell me what you were doing when the war started in 1941.

JH: I was working for Universal Oil Products Company, in Des Plaines, Illinois. (At that time, the laboratories were at McCook, Illinois, having moved later to Des Plaines.) I was involved in research and petroleum refining. Actually, at that time, I was working on catalyst, for what was called catalytic cracking. It was a process for producing motor fuel from heavier petroleum products, heavy oils and so on that were not useful for motor fuel, of course. We had small laboratory units that we would feed these heavier oils in and then over a catalyst. We'd make different catalysts, try different compositions, and determine the amount of hydrocarbon in the motor fuel range that would come out of that. On that basis we would evaluate the catalyst, whether this catalyst was better than another composition that we tried.

GR: Was this generated by the war itself, or were you working on it before?

JH: We were working on it before. They need fuel for automobiles, of course. Actually, in connection with the war, they were interested in high-test fuels—of course, they were for automobiles also, but it was more important for aviation. As a matter of fact, our company developed what was called an alkylation process which produced very high-test motor fuel. Actually I wasn't involved directly in that project, but that fuel, actually helped win the war. You see, the more power they could get out of an airplane engine of a given size by using a higher compression ratio, the faster the plane would go, because these were propeller planes in those days. And so, by using that fuel in our planes, they
could increase the compression ratio on the engines and the planes could go faster, our bombers could escape the Germans planes that would pursue them after they dropped their bombs. Also, the fighters had an advantage, too, by being able to fly faster than the German fighters.

GR: Because of your not fighting in the war, was that due to the fact that you were older than the draft age, or was it because you were involved in the war industry?

JH: I think both factors may have entered in, actually. I think as far as what I was doing, perhaps if I had been twenty-one or twenty-two years old, maybe I would have been called anyway—not be able to stay out. But I was about twenty-eight years old then. If I hadn’t been in the kind of work I was, they possibly would have taken me anyway, because I know they were taking men of that age. But actually, each time I would get a six-month deferment; I would get a notice of classification 1-A, which meant that you were eligible for call. Then I’d turn that in at the personnel department at work and a little while later I’d get a reclassification to 4-A because I was in work aiding the war effort. That would be for six months again and after six months I’d get another 1-A notice and turn that in again. One time I got as far as being called in for a preliminary physical exam before getting the change in classification. So I appeared for that and had a preliminary physical, but then a few days later that change occurred again. So that’s as close I as came to being actually called in.

GR: Did you ever have the desire to leave what you were doing and join the other group?

JH: No.
GR: Plus, like what you said, it was an involvement on your part that probably won the war in one way or the other. Were there lots of older men in the laboratory, like you, that were... it was more important to have you there than overseas?

JH: I wasn’t particularly aware of the status of other men; we didn’t talk about that.

GR: Were there lots of female employees there?

JH: No, not at that time. But we did have several in the research department. There were several older men than I, who probably wouldn’t have been called anyway even if they weren’t in essential industry.

GR: Outside of work, what was life like during the war for you? Were you married?

JH: No, I was going with Grace at the time of Pearl Harbor. Actually I started in 1941 and, it was about in June we had our first date. I met her in June of 1941, and we were going together at that time. Then the following year, even though there was this question, we still decided to take the chance and get married. We were married in September of 1942.

GR: Was that hard to do at that time, to get married?

JH: There was always a question of whether we’d be able to stay together, you know, if I would be called overseas or something then we’d be separated. Actually, Grace’s cousin, her friend was...in fact, it was through them that we met. He worked for the same company I did; we shared rides together to work. He was in a little different job; he was in the analytical labs, where they ran tests and so on on different samples that were sent in by the research department. He was about four years younger than I was, and so he had to go, they called him and he was not deferred. They got married, and the day after they came back from their honeymoon, he was called and he had to go. He spent the whole time in England, in communications, so he was not actually in combat. He was at
some station someplace in northern England, actually out of the danger zone really. But he spent the whole time there.

GR: During this time when you were going to work, what was Grace doing?

JH: She was working at Columbia Mills at that time—a company that made window blinds and things like that.

GR: Was that in relation to the war effort?

JH: No. No relation to the war effort.

GR: What was it like to be a young couple dealing with rationing and impending draft calls? What was it like for you as the man of the house to deal with that?

JH: It was somewhat of a problem. Tire rationing, for example, on automobiles...there was gasoline rationing, I might mention that. They had different rations. The A ration was for ordinary families that didn’t need the car for essential use, like going to work or something like that. That was the smallest ration, I don’t remember how much, how many gallons per week or so you could get. I had a C ration because I had quite a ways to go to work. So that was supposed to get me enough to go to work.

GR: They didn’t ask you to relocate to save money?

JH: No. And then with tire rationing, if you had a bad tire on your car, if it got bad enough, you could get a ration for a new tire. The new one was a retread, you couldn’t buy new tires.

GR: Food-wise you did alright?

JH: Yeah, we got enough to eat, but there were limits. You had to ration stamps for sugar, for meat, and for some other things—I don’t remember what all. You learned to use them up as fast as you could, because if you had any left at a certain time, they would issue a new
set and then your old ones wouldn’t be good anymore. Then you had to start using the new ones. So people would tend to spend them probably faster than they needed. Same way with shoes; they had rations for shoes. You could get a stamp that allowed for a new pair of shoes, and then maybe a year later, I don’t remember how long those stamps were good, you never knew just how long they would be good. A year later, they would cancel those and issue a new one.

GR: So there must have been shortages because people running to get things immediately.

JH: No, there weren’t. Usually if you wanted something you could get it. If you had the stamp, you could get it.

GR: So, patriotically, in the town you were living, was it pretty good? Were people all behind the effort and the war?

JH: Yeah, I think mostly. Although there was some black marketing in some things too, like for example, sometimes people would have the opportunities to get ham without a stamp or something like that. Some people would take advantage of it, some people felt that wasn’t right, you know, that you shouldn’t do that.

GR: Had you talked about having children, or did you have children during the war?

JH: We didn’t have any during the war, but that was because we decided not to have any right away. There was always a question about that, what happened. Actually Willard and Jeanette, their child, what was their oldest boy? Roger Willard. They had a child before the war ended.

GR: As the war came to an end, how did your life change in the workplace?

JH: It really didn’t change too much because we were always interested in producing higher-octane fuel. There were changes that occurred that were not really involved in the war.
effort, mainly because of the status of the company. When I worked there earlier, our company was owned by six other major oil companies. Our value to them was mainly the things that we developed could be used free by all them. Any other refiner who wanted to use our process had to license it and pay royalties.

GR: So were you affiliated with a particular company?

JH: Universal Oil Products Company. But we were owned by six other major companies—Shell, Standard, and I don’t remember the other four. One of our big functions was to service small independent refiners. If they needed to upgrade their refinery, our engineers would design it and help build the new equipment for their refinery so they could produce better or more fuel. The Justice Department decided that was a combination in restraint of trade. When we were owned by all the major companies, serve the small independent refiners, so they had to get rid of the company. They decided to donate the company to the American Chemical Society. The American Chemical Society, of course, didn’t want to actually be saddled with running the company, so they turned the assets over to the Morgan Guarantee Trust Company, and that company set up to run the company. So then we were independent. At that time we developed a process for refining motor fuel called the platforming process. You would take low octane, low grade motor fuel and pass it over a catalyst at high temperature, and it would come out to much higher octane number. Then the process turned a lot of the hydrocarbons in the original fuel into aromatic compounds. These are things like benzene, toluene, xylene, and things that were formerly, or even at that time, came from coal tar. You’ve heard of coal tar dies, well these compounds were used in preparing the coal tar dies. The fuel that came out of this process was rich in these aromatics, and what was more, they were
much more pure than you could get from coal tar. Stuff from coal tar had thiophene in it, a sulfur compound which was very difficult to get rid of, whereas our product didn’t have the thiophene in it. That produced competition for the coal tar industry, in fact the coal tar people came to us and wondered if we had some process that we could help them get rid of the thiophene in their product. (laughs)

GR: Before you met Grace, was she working?

JH: Yeah, she was working at Columbia Mills when we met.

GR: After you married, she continued to work?

JH: Just for short time, fourth months then she quit. We had one car then, and I needed the car to go to work most of the time. She had to take about four street cars I think to get to work, and that was a severe winter too, and so waiting outside at every stop for the next car, that got to be quite brutal, so she decided to quit.

GR: So did Grace become a homemaker at that point?

JH: Yeah.

GR: After the birth of your first child, was it assumed that Grace would stay home?

JH: Yeah, she never thought of going back to work that I know of.

GR: You as the breadwinner at this point, did you spend more than forty hours a week outside the house after the war just trying to work and climb the ladder of success?

JH: No. Actually, during the war, I worked six days because we didn’t get Saturdays off then either. When I first started, I worked Saturday, half a day, and the other five days. But then when the war effort started, then we worked six days. After that, I think I went back to just working Saturdays for a while, but eventually they scaled down to forty hours a week.
GR: Can you tell me a little bit about how your family life, as children were appearing, differed from your own childhood? Was your father also an engineer?

JH: No. He worked for the Pullman Company as a draftsman. By the time I got married, he was in charge of the blueprint room. He had some young fellows assisting; they would take the tracings, the original drawings, were fed into a machine and out would come the blueprints, but they came as one sheet of paper. They had young fellows with scissors cutting these different sheets out, and those would go to the shops for use in the construction of the Pullman cars.

GR: From what you learned from your parents as a child, did you transfer some of that to your own children? Or was it totally different?

JH: I suppose in some way. I’m sure how we treat our children was influenced by the way we were brought up. There were some changes though, I know that.

GR: So you did modify some things you learned?

JH: Yeah.

GR: Would you like to elaborate on those?

JH: My father was very protective, he didn’t like us to get out of the house. When I was in high school, I had an opportunity to go with my chemistry teacher to the University of Illinois for something over there one day. My father didn’t want me to go with him; I wasn’t allowed to go with him.

GR: Is there any reason why that happened?

JH: I think he was just kind of afraid that something might happen, I don’t know.

GR: Were you an only child?
JH: No, I had a sister two years younger, and a brother eight years older. He was already married at that time.

GR: When you had your own children, how did you and Grace change that way of thinking?

JH: If they were going on things, we would consider who they were going with. I know our boys went with...it was a fellow from our church that was involved with the young people, and he would take the boys in connection with...the whole group from church up to a camp for a week. They didn’t go to Camp Roger; Camp Roger wasn’t there at that time. They went to some camp up north. But anyway, it was with a whole group from church. They would do different things—teach them how to do the things in the woods, use things that were in the woods, and so on.

GR: So you were glad that they had that chance to do that?

JH: Yeah. Of course, we were always glad to see them come back again.

GR: At any time during the time you were raising children, did your parents make any comments or offer any guidance, even if you didn’t ask for it?

JH: No, I don’t think too much. I think they pretty much left us alone in raising our children.

GR: As a couple, did your work schedule have any impact on your marriage—meaning, did Grace wish you were home more or wish you were able to spend more time with the kids versus being at work?

JH: I don’t know whether Grace talked too much about that. I know I felt that way, particularly when our company moved to Des Plaines. They moved farther away and I had a longer trip to work, so I wound up taking almost an hour each way, an extra two hours, in addition to the time I was at work. I always felt that that limited my time. We considered moving, but considering various things—locations of Christian schools,
church, things like that—there wasn’t any closer area that I thought I would really want to move to.

GR: Do the kids ever mention that to you, that they wished you were around more?

JH: No, I don’t think so.

GR: When the kids were older or there was a babysitter available, what types of things did you and Grace do?

JH: We didn’t go out too much together without the children. We did get babysitters once in a while for certain things. We did go once a month on Saturday evening, a group that bowled, it was Scotch doubles bowling, if you know what that is. We had a good time then, bowl, and then afterward go to a restaurant.

GR: So you spent lots of free time with your kids. What sorts of activities would the family do?

JH: Of course, on our vacation we would all go together as a family someplace, several times at cottages. One year we just decided we were going to take a trip around the lake. On the way back there was a set of cottages on Manistique Lake, then they said a cottage was available, open, so we went there. This was because it was a time when something happened in the automobile industry, all the men were laid off and so on. So there wasn’t a lot of demand for the cottages, the people in the automobile industry couldn’t afford to spend time at a cottage. So we went there, and they were willing to rent a cottage for the night, that’s all we intended. But we didn’t have to be back yet, my vacation wasn’t over, and so we stayed a couple more nights, just renting by the day. We thought that was pretty decent. So the next year we registered in advance at the same place and spent a week there, one time two weeks, I think. So several years we did that. We also took
some trips. We took a trip to Black Hills once. I remember our youngest son—he was about three years old or something like that—all of a sudden we were looking at the stone faces there, and looked around and he was gone. We wondered where he was. Finally we looked around and we found him. He had found his way back to the car. He was standing by the car waiting for us. (laughs)

GR: Were the kids involved in different activities that you were able to, as a family, join in as a watcher, a spectator?

JH: Jerry was in a Little League baseball team; he played baseball. That was our oldest son. I don’t remember too much the others now, but they didn’t care for baseball. But they all got into music of various types. Jerry wanted to be in the band when he was four years old. He had his eye on the baritone horn. At the time, I couldn’t quite see buying him a baritone horn, it’s quite an expensive instrument. We got to talking…the teacher was able to get a used trumpet quite reasonable. So we decided he would study his trumpet. He did so well that it wasn’t long before he needed a better trumpet. (laughs) He did alright, and finally he went into music. Actually he studied music at Calvin; he was in the band at Calvin. At the annual performance of the Messiah, which was done at the Civic Center then, they didn’t have the Van Andel Auditorium then.

[End of side A]

JH: [Continuing] So then he decided to go on; we wondered whether he would go on. He was good at writing, and he was also good in art, you know, painting and so on. He did a lot of oil painting. But he finally decided to go on into music. He went to Ohio State grad school and got his Ph.D. in Music History, and he taught for five years at Trinity Christian College in Chicago. Then he went to Wichita State University in Kansas. He
was there two years, but during the second year the music department got notice they had to decrease their staff because of funding problems. So his contract wasn’t renewed. At that time he heard about an opening at St. Olaf College, so he applied for that, and he was awarded that position. That’s where he is now; he’s been there since. He had a group, what they called a collegium musicum, a group that played the old instruments, you know the shawns and sackbuts and all those old instruments. When he applied at St. Olaf they said that wasn’t a requirement for the position but it would be like icing on the cake. So he started a group like that there too.

GR: Speaking of your children, are you pleased at where they ended up, and do you think you had a influence on that?

JH: I think we did, I’m sure we did. I’m happy about where they ended up, yeah. Two of them went into the same field I was in, in chemistry. Marv is in Holland here, he works for, well it’s Pfizer now, it used to be Parke-Davis. He’s a chemist. He got his Ph.D. in chemistry; I only got my bachelor’s degree. Norm, at Calvin, was awarded a fellowship too in analytical chemistry when he was at Purdue, in Lafayette, Indiana. During his first year there, he found out that analytic chemistry was becoming more electronics than chemistry because it’s all done with instruments now. You put a sample in an instrument and it gives you the information, there’s not much chemistry involved. So he decided that wasn’t for him. Then he decided he thought he’d like to go into teaching chemistry. He took the required courses in education and taught for about fifteen years in California, at Cerritos, a Christian high school there. After that he came back to Holland here, so he’s teaching at Holland Christian now. In fact it was through him that we got to move to Holland here. I always thought Holland would be a nice place to live, but we never could
really see moving here, but we wanted to do something where we were anyway. I had
been retired for several years but we were looking to do something, a different house and
so on. So it turned out Norm’s father-in-law is a building contractor. When Norm and
Nance came back to Holland, when he got that job here, then they built the house back
here. We got to talking, and they said his father-in-law had got this whole big piece of
land here. They had a lot, we could build a house here, so that’s what happened then.
That was kind of nice to have someone you knew and could trust to be working on the
home for you. Because otherwise, if you’re back, like over there and have a strange
contractor building a home here, you can’t keep track of what’s going on.

GR: No, that’s true. Jim, did you have any leisure time that you spent alone—crafts or
bowling or golf?

JH: I was interested more in crafts, as you call them. As a matter of fact...well, this
happened while I was working yet. I got interested in marquetry. I had an uncle who
years ago did some marquetry for the Pullman Company. They would have panels in the
old Pullman cars that were good marquetry. He had several pictures in his home that he
had made, and I was always fascinated by them. One was a picture of a tiger, another a
picture of Father Time, and so on—all made in inlaid wood. Several years at least before
I retired, I ran across a company that would furnish the materials for them, the veneers
and the... They had kits; you’d buy a kit for a certain picture. It would have the pattern
for the picture, and enough of each veneer as required for the picture and so on the other
materials. I bought one of those kits and made the picture. Then I bought three or four
more kits. But then I joined the marquetry society and they had a pattern library, so I got
some other patterns and just bought the veneers on my own to work on. I did a lot of... of course, as you see I have a few of them around here.

GR: So there were times even when the kids were a little bit young that you were doing that as kind of an outlet?

JH: Yeah.

GR: After your children, I assume, all went off to college, did you and Grace have to readjust to the fact that you had more time together and more money and more room?

JH: That, of course, happened gradually because they went out one at a time to college. They got married and so on. So I don’t know. It wasn’t too much of a problem readjusting really. It happened gradually.

GR: At retirement, was there a bigger adjustment?

JH: No, no. That was no problem at all. I didn’t miss my job at all.

GR: So once you left the job, you and Grace, I assume, started doing more activities together as a couple?

JH: Well, I suppose, yeah. We didn’t do a lot of traveling or anything, if that’s what you mean. We never really went for a lot of traveling.

GR: You were home a lot more, of course, and Grace had been here as a homemaker most of her life, did she see kind of an intrusion or wish you had other things to do? Did she mention that to you at all?

JH: No, I don’t think we ever had a problem that I got in your way, did I?

GR: With your grandchildren, you know, you raised three kids, or four?

JH: Four children, and we have eight grandchildren.

GR: Did your parenting of the four affect how you treat the eight grandchildren?
JH: No, not too much, because none of the grandchildren live near us. After our children were married, they didn’t live near us. Actually our first grandchild…that was when our son Jerry moved to California, he taught for a while…I should say that our son Jerry got married at the time of the Vietnam War. He, like a lot of kids, was totally against that war; he thought that we should never have been in that war. He had a fellowship at Ohio State, or could have gone to Ohio State on a fellowship, but he knew that if he took that he’d be called for the war, so he took a job teaching at a junior high school in California for a year. That was when he got married, then their child was born. It was soon after he was born that they moved to California. That was our first grandchild, wasn’t near us of course. He was there for a year, and then after that year the situation was off as far as the Vietnam War was concerned. I guess he contacted Ohio State again, and he could still get in on this deal at Ohio State. So then he went to Ohio State for his Ph.D. in musicology.

GR: Did you find it hard as parents dealing not only with something like that but some of the other changes that America was undergoing?

JH: Well, yes, but you know what could we do about it?

GR: Did your kids get caught up in some of the activities of the youth that you disagreed with?

JH: No, we didn’t have that problem.

GR: What do you attribute that to, Jim?

JH: I suppose it was because of their bringing up in the church, Christian Reformed Church, and so on, school, yeah. Our boys went to Calvin College. Our daughter was the oldest. She went into nurses’ training. She had a hard time deciding whether to go to college
because some of her high school teachers thought that she ought to go to college, and probably would be good at teaching or something. She had decided to go into nurses’ training at the hospital in Oak Park, Illinois—I forget the name of the hospital now. But it was a hospital there. The nurses’ program was connected with Wheaton College. The required chemistry courses they took at Wheaton. So she went into nurses training and then she married Carl Afman, who went to seminary. Jan, our daughter, they were married then; Jan worked at Pinerest while Karl was at the seminary. Then after that he got a call to Hancock, Minnesota, and their child was born there in Hancock, Minnesota.

GR: Do you have any connection to your grandkids at all? Do you have time to spend with them, and do they ask you questions about things they should be doing and directions they should take?

JH: Well, the boys were all so far away that we didn’t have much contact with them unless we visited there or they came here. Those things happened mostly when they were real young. Brent, our daughter’s son, they were in Taiwan for about ten years when he grew up. So when they came back, then he was ready for high school and he went to high school in Indiana. Or actually the high school was in Lansing, Illinois, but they, at that time he was a pastor of a church in Hammond, Indiana. No, the closest contact is really with our granddaughters. They were all in the Holland area. Marv had three girls and Norm has two.

GR: Is there anything you wanted to add about your life since the war or things that happened that kind of changed the way you thought about America or marriage in general and having kids? Have things, for you, been a reflection lately?

JH: Well, no, I can’t say too much.
GR: Pretty happy with how thing turned out?

JH: Well, of course, I don’t go along with a lot of the trend today about things like abortion and the ideas of what constitutes a family and so on, those things. But I’m happy that there seems to be a trend in the other direction now. So I hope the pendulum keeps swinging.

GR: Well thank you, Jim.